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CREATING AN INTENTIONALLY DIALOGIC SPACE: STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE NEWCASTLE OCCUPATION 2010

INTRODUCTION: YOUNG PEOPLE, POLITICS AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

Just over ten years ago, Philo and Smith (2003: 103) noted that ‘the sub-discipline of political geography has never shown any special interest in children and young people’ and contended that this was not surprising, given that young people below voting age do not have much influence on different ‘political’ structures. A useful point of differentiation made by Philo and Smith (2003) was to make a distinction between Politics (with a capital ‘P’) and politics (with a small ‘p’) to clarify the difference between formal macropolitics and the micropolitics of everyday life. Arguably, the field has made much progress in the last ten years or so (Hopkins and Alexander, 2010; Kallio and Häkli, 2011; Philo and Smith, 2013; Skelton, 2013). The place of young people in political geography has been the focus of research articles on topics as diverse as: young people’s engagements with immigration systems and debates (Cahill, 2010; Crawley, 2010); ethnicised and minoritised young people’s post-9/11 political engagement (Hörschelmann, 2008a; Hopkins, 2004); young people’s performance of citizenship (Staeheli et al., 2013); everyday emotional geopolitics of youth (Pain et al., 2010); and the political worlds of children (e.g. Elwood and Mitchell, 2012; Kallio and Häkli, 2011; Mitchell and Elwood, 2013). A significant set of contributions within this area has been advanced by Hörschelmann (2008a; Hörschelmann and El Rafaie, 2013; Hörschelmann and Schafer, 2005). Hörschelmann convincingly argues that we need to broaden our view of political agency to consider young people’s place in the ‘making, renegotiation and contestation of global politics’ (2008a: 587) and to appreciate the ‘embodied, material engagements’ (p. 599) of young people with political issues.

Neighbouring (sub)disciplines to political geographies of youth – such as political science, sociology of youth citizenship and childhood studies – have all experienced a similarly recent growth of interest in the relationships between children, youth and politics. Research in political science has started to develop a critical mass focused on young people’s politics (e.g. Sloam, 2010, 2012), with the Political Studies Association in the UK setting up a specialist group, Young People’s Politics, in 2013 (<http://www.psa.ac.uk/psa-communities/specialist-groups/young->

[peoples-politics](#)). Political science research has focused on explaining patterns of youth voting (Fahmy, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2012; Phelps, 2004) and attitudes towards political parties (Henn et al., 2002, 2005). Closely related to this, research about youth citizenship has explored young people's conceptualisations of citizenship and transition (Lister et al., 2003, Thomson et al., 2004). Childhood studies scholarship has included, for example, reflections on the political engagements of children in everyday life (Moss, 2013) and representations of youth protests against the Iraq war (Such et al., 2004).

In terms of young people's engagements with formal politics, commonsense discourse tends to represent them as apathetic, disengaged and inert (Henn et al., 2002). This is perhaps not surprising, given that only 39% of eligible 18–24-year-olds in the UK voted in 2001, with 37% voting in 2005 and 44% in 2010 (compared with overall figures of 59%, 61% and 65% respectively for the population as a whole). This is similar to trends across Europe, where elections in the 2000s saw 59% of 18–24-year-olds turn out to vote, compared to 82% for the population as a whole (Sloam, 2013). Young people also have lower levels of membership of political parties and are less likely to show any affiliations or connections with such organisations than their older contemporaries (Henn and Foard, 2012; Sloam, 2013). This has led to explorations of the reasons behind lower levels of voting amongst younger people (Kimberlee, 2002) and recommendations for how politics may be made more engaging for younger people (White et al., 2000). Some would lay the blame directly on young people for their apparent disengagement and lower levels of political knowledge compared to their parents' generation (Pattie et al., 2004), with some studies even arguing that 'because young people conceptualise politics in a limited and narrow way they perceive the subject as boring and irrelevant to their lives at present' (White et al., 2000: vi). This view can be critiqued similarly to the criticism made of critical geopolitics for its focus on elite discourse rather than on how political issues are experienced, negotiated and lived out in everyday life (e.g. Hörschelmann, 2008b).

Recent studies, however, have provided a range of alternative responses to simply labelling young people as disengaged and apathetic as a result of their lower levels of engagement with formal politics. Although young people may be less likely to vote than their parents' or grandparents' generations, this does not necessarily

mean that young people are disengaged or have no interest in politics. Indeed, O'Toole et al. (2003) have provided a powerful critique of the literature on young people and politics for adopting too narrow a definition of the political (see also Marsh et al., 2007, 2007). There is much evidence to show that young people do engage in a variety of different forms of political activity, whether this is through volunteering, campaigning, demonstration or through awareness-raising, boycott or direct action (e.g. Hörschelmann, 2008a; Roker et al., 1999). The issue is the imposition on young people of a narrow definition of politics and a top-down perception about what citizenship and democracy are about. Furthermore, Marsh et al. (2007) query the simplistic association between non-participation and apathy, as young people – indeed any person – clearly may have a very well thought-through, detailed and political reason for not voting or not engaging with a specific political issue, therefore non-participation does not equate to apathy. Henn and Foard (2012: 52) note that their research revealed that, 'far from being apolitical and apathetic, young people are interested in political matters, and are more so than were their predecessors in 2002'. Two key issues are: first, young people are interested and engaged in Politics (despite not voting as regularly as the generations before them); and second, adopting a broader definition of 'politics' (to include micro and macro political issues) makes it clear that young people's everyday lives are inherently political in a whole range of complex ways.

We contend that work about children, youth and politics tends to focus either on young people's (weak) relationship with formal politics (e.g. voting, political party membership, etc) or on the multiple and complex ways that political issues are part and parcel of children's and young people's everyday lives. Arguably, the former is concerned with defining what constitutes politics (and then places young people's engagement onto this definition), whilst the latter is focused on conceptualising and mapping out young people's politics. Whilst speaking to both sets of debates, we locate this paper in an alternative set of literature that shows attentiveness to young people's political engagements and activism in spaces that are arguably neither formal political spaces nor 'everyday' political spaces. In particular, this paper is situated in emerging literatures about student resistance and protest in response to government cuts to the funding of higher education in England (Burton et al., 2013, Hancox, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2012; Radice, 2013; Solomon and Palmieri, 2011;

Theocharis, 2012, 2013a, b) as well as broader debates about student activism (Crossley, 2008; Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012) and geographies of protest and social movements (Gillan et al., 2011; Nicholls, 2007; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). In order to make an important contribution to research in this area, we focus on a detailed analysis of interviews with students who participated in an Occupation of the Fine Art Lecture Theatre in Newcastle University for 17 days in late 2010. We chart the political engagements of these students and use the idea of 'intentional dialogism' to help explore the practices and processes that the students engaged with in order to create an 'intentionally dialogic space'. To do this we investigate how the students organised the Occupation, used social media, engaged with elite figures and participated in non-violent direct action as part of their intentionally dialogic political engagements as members of the Newcastle Occupation. Before exploring the empirical material, we provide the context of rising tuition fees and student Occupations in England, followed by a brief outline of intentional dialogism and our methodological approach.

RISING TUITION FEES AND STUDENT OCCUPATIONS: THE STUDY

Motivated by its perceived need to make a series of 'austerity cuts', in late 2010 the Coalition government of the UK was successful in securing agreement to increase university tuition fees to a maximum of £9000 per year (previously increased in 2004 to £3000). Alongside this, cuts were proposed to a range of welfare entitlements in England, notably educational maintenance allowance (EMA), which was a means-tested payment made to young people who continued in post-compulsory schooling beyond the minimum school leaving age. These proposals resulted in protests, marches, campaigns and Occupations across the country:

The student Occupations of university buildings signalled the beginning of an ongoing campaign against increased tuition fees in November 2010 and mobilised students to participate in a series of large, and occasionally violent, demonstrations in late 2010. The Occupations were part of the 'Anti-cuts' movement.... (Theocharis, 2012: 164)

Towards the end of November, following a National Day of Action to defend education, groups of university students joined teachers, social workers and

lecturers in cities across England and marched in resistance to the cuts being implemented by the government. Subsequently, a number of universities found that groups of students had taken occupation of university buildings in order to challenge their universities to resist the increase in tuition fees being proposed by the government. On 24 November 2010 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the North East of England, after a peaceful demonstration through the city and a 'teach-in' meeting organised by Newcastle Free Education Network (NFEN), around 60 students occupied the Fine Art lecture theatre of Newcastle University. One of the main aims of the Occupation was for the Vice Chancellor of the University (the university's most senior academic/manager) to give a public statement of opposition to the increase in tuition fees. Some of the key moments of Newcastle Occupation are recorded elsewhere (see Hopkins et al., 2012) and included a sophisticated range of political manoeuvres and strategies that was carefully planned and carried out by engaged and politically astute young people. It ended 17 days later when students left the Fine Art Lecture Theatre on Sunday 11 December and continued their demonstration as part of a peaceful march through the city, chanting 'This is only the beginning'.

This paper draws upon an analysis of 27 interviews that the authors conducted with young people involved in the Newcastle Occupation. These interviews were supported by photographs taken by the authors and by the students, and diary notes taken by the authors during the Occupation. Of the sample we recruited, 10% of the students were in their first year, 23% in second year, 26% in third year and 10% in fourth (or Masters year) year at Newcastle University, with an additional 32% of the participants belonging to other universities, colleges, and secondary schools. More than half the participants were studying humanities and social sciences, with only 10% and 6% studying medicine and science respectively.

All the interviews were fully transcribed, then coded and analysed by theme. Where students are quoted, we use pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. Students were keen for academic analysis of their Occupation to be undertaken and, indeed, several made the Occupation the subject of module essays and Masters' dissertations. We are conscious that we accessed some who were most committed to the Occupation as well as some with only a passing interest; however, this was an appropriate sample group, since it was our intention to find out about the detailed operation of the Occupation and about student occupiers' feelings and views. The

interviews focused on young people's motivations for involvement in the Occupation and their personal perspectives and views on their everyday experiences of the Occupation. Such discussions inevitably also explored the political motivations and strategies of members of the Newcastle Occupation, many of which the authors also observed during the forms of non-violent direct action planned by Occupation members and through regular visits to offer support and encouragement to those involved.

The authors were regular visitors to the Occupation, bringing food, talking to the students and attending some meetings. One of the authors delivered a lecture as part of the alternative education in the Occupation and we participated in public marches. Our involvement gave us the opportunity to see how the Occupation worked in more detail, and to observe the interactions and practices within the Occupation. Indeed, without our own commitment to the values and aims of the Occupation we should not have been given permission to interview, yet as members of academic staff we were outsiders to the lives of the students. We thus occupy a blend of insider and outsider positions that usefully enabled us to capture a range of interesting perspectives about the Newcastle Occupation. As outsiders to the organisation of student resistance to government policy we did not have any experience (for example, of organisation of political action) that might lead us to expectations about how the occupation would be organised.

CREATING INTENTIONALLY DIALOGIC SPACES

Although we locate this paper in a set of interdisciplinary debates about young people's engagement with politics, we also make an important contribution to ongoing deliberations within geography about different forms of social and political activism (e.g. Nicholls, 2007; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006), geographies of democracy and citizenship (e.g. Barnett and Bridge, 2012; Barnett and Low, 2004a; Staeheli, 2010) and the contested formation of different political spaces (e.g. Mitchell, 2003; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2004; Young, 1990). In particular, this paper contributes to debates about the plural spaces of democracy and the differential access to such spaces that are afforded to different social groups (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2004). In this case, we explore the ways in which young people create political and democratic spaces – focusing specifically upon dialogue as one form of

intentional political practice – in a context where their views and perspectives are rarely considered politically relevant or significant.

We expected that an Occupation would be characterised by dialogue of some kind, at the very least to maintain it and to organise any actions. However, our observations and our analysis of the interviews suggest a range of practices deliberately designed to encourage interaction about the issues of living in the Occupation and of organising actions to fulfil the aims of the Occupation. What we observed and heard about seemed to go beyond dialogue.

It was dialogism, rather than dialogue, that provided a way to conceptualise much of what seemed to characterise the Occupation. The multiple meanings of dialogism were useful to us, with Wegerif (2007) identifying four uses of the term, two of which are pertaining to dialogue, and a social ontology. The former refers to a willingness to embrace different ideas and to co-construct alternatives. The aim is ‘not to reach convergence (dialectic) but to hold difference, to hold different perspectives in tension’, and as such to produce ‘sparks of insight, learning and creativity (Wegerif, 2007 speaking about dialogism in education)’ (Barrow, 2011: 34). What we are talking about here is not the convergence of positions through discussion in some kind of more or less simplistic consensus, but the coming together of different ideas whilst at the same time maintaining difference. In our analysis the complex ways in which the Occupation was created suggested deliberate actions to bring about dialogism in people’s dealings with each other.

Ontological dialogism was important to our analysis of the Occupation in understanding the holding together of difference. The explanation is in seeing ourselves as multi-voiced: that, in any thinking or communication, “‘the other” (or others) are always present at different levels’ (Linell, 2009, pxxviii). Dialogism is an ontological position that regards the self as defined through dialogue with others (Wegerif, 2007). Markova (2003a) suggests that, for Bakhtin, each of us is ‘living in a world of other’s words’ (p. 83). Dialogism is the individual, ontologically in relationship with the other. Humans are therefore not bounded individuals but relational selves with language as foundational to that relationship (Barrow, 2011: 34-35). Therefore, in dialogue with others in which co-construction is intended, difference characterises not only the self and the other person. The assumption is

that each of us is multi-voiced and the range of voices we speak with, and to, reflects our relationships, communities, cultures and histories (Markova, 2000). The multiple voices we use also involve speech that is given voice through internal dialogue: 'This means... that dialogue is both situated and unsituated' (Wegerif, 2011). When we engage in dialogue with others therefore we do not necessarily speak from a single position. We give expression to a range of different, and at times, competing voices (Markova et al., 2007). It is the continuous dynamic and open nature of the relationship of these voices that explains change (Markova, 2003a). Markova (2003b) argues that a dialogic ontology is able to account for 'innovation, creativity and change' (p. 255). The transformative aspect of a dialogic position has particular significance to participation practices (Barrow, 2011: 34-35).

Through our analysis, we found that the young people involved in the Occupation were creating a 'dialogically managed space'. In *On Revolution*, Arendt (1965) claims that the revitalisation of political capacity for impartial and respectful judgement rests on the creation of spaces for collective deliberation. In the Occupation such spaces seemed to be created, dialogically managed spaces. This paper therefore contributes to continuing debates about consensual (Habermas) versus conflictual (Mouffe) theories of democracy. Beaumont and Nicholls (2008: 90) contend that Mouffe argues that 'radical democracy is impossible without the capacity for diverse political subjects to freely exert their multiple identities', and that she see this happening 'above all in an "agonistic" and conflictual polity'. While deliberative and agonistic approaches to democracy are often contrasted in the literature, both consensus and conflict were concepts drawn upon by those in the Occupation and we were interested in how they contributed to the dialogic space.

Although young people are often excluded from many kinds of dialogues, political engagements, decision making, and action – assuming that such activities are for politicians and those formally involved in the political system – this did not seem to be happening in the Occupation. This may perhaps be unsurprising, given that some members of the Occupation may be seen as having considerable social capital and being politically engaged; however, the Occupation included many students who previously had not been particularly engaged with or interested in politics, and there were a number members of the Occupation who were too young to vote or who had not yet had the opportunity to be involved in formal politics. We

were interested in what had brought about this *intended* dialogism in the nature of how people engaged with each other. It created a space within which people could openly discuss matters, create an alternative community and facilitate direct action.

This paper explores the processes that the students put in place to create this 'dialogically managed space' and the internal structures in the Occupation that were the instruments of dialogism. Furthermore, we observed that the creation of this intentionally dialogic space connected simultaneously with multiple scales as the students engaged in embodied, public and urban tactics to mobilise against national and institutional policies. We explore this by demonstrating how the students organised the Occupation, used social media and the internet, decided to undertake specific forms of direct action and engaged with the elite. We now consider each of these in turn.

ORGANISING THE OCCUPATION

We were able to capture a number of features of the relationships in the Occupation: the way that occupiers lived together within the Occupation space and the processes of interaction that assisted in decision-making. Whilst there were undoubtedly all kinds of complexities that we were unable to capture, the interview data suggest several important themes. There were number of deliberate practices to create the community within the Occupation in relation to a number of values. This deliberate shaping of the living space and ways to live as a community seemed to be part and parcel of the Occupation politics rather than accidental.

There was a deliberate maintenance of a non-hierarchical structure of decision-making and a rejection of both a core management group and the direction of externally validated political parties or group. This was demonstrated in making the chairing of meetings open to all, accepting strangers into the Occupation who named themselves as Occupation members or who showed support for the aims of the Occupation, and not allowing those with a strong political party affiliation to have any more influence than other Occupation members. Maintaining these ideals seemed to mean living with contradictions. Those members that put themselves forward in the discussions were more likely to influence the decision-making, and not everyone was able to give the same amount of time to be present. The need for certain roles to be carried out well and efficiently, and the skills needed for some

roles, meant some degree of delegation and therefore concentration of influence. This included a media group that maintained a website, Twitter feed, Facebook page and email. It was recognised that some people had particular skills such as negotiating with external parties, writing press releases or engaging with the media. In particular, there was a relatively small group of people that had conversations with key bodies outside the Occupation in order either to maintain the Occupation or to carry out actions. This included the local police, the University management, the student union authorities, the press and other Occupations.

One of the main remits of the Occupation – as agreed by its membership – was to participate in a range of external events that drew the attention of the University, the press, the public and other authorities such as the City Council to the Occupation's political demands. Planning meetings deliberately sought a process whereby the expression of all views was encouraged. Explicit ideas of particular forms of radical democracy were enacted (Barnett and Low, 2004b). Decisions were taken through dialogue rather than by voting and were therefore focused on the principles of consensus-based decision making (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). The particular consensus model adopted by students relied upon 'genuine reception of the other' (Barrow and Todd, in Kennedy et al., 2011). This represented the value given to shades of opinion rather than binary positions. However, this was time-consuming, as noted by several interviewees. At meetings people were encouraged to contribute their ideas to show agreement with what others said using 'jazz hands' (a hand waving motion) and to speak if they did not agree. The chairing of meetings changed every day and was open to all, but was not taken up by everyone. These understandings and ways of making decisions were often re-affirmed at the start of meetings. The dialogic space was about friendship and justice. For several respondents, such as Samantha, this was about creating a new society:

Samantha: it's about equality, it's about co-operation and friendship and bringing those all together to create... a more just society and in lots of different and same ways but I suppose one of the aspects of it is the co-operation, it comes back to, you know, the idea of how we actually...

There was very much a sense of creating a space that had practical attributes, enabled resistance and was symbolic, as Samantha continued:

Samantha: well everything was run on... largely consensus which is the principle that if we're all there for a common aim which is to get our demands met... we were going to do that by not just going to votes every single time because I really, really strongly believe in this and like as soon as you vote you, it doesn't matter whether the minority is one person, that one person has lost out and that one person has a voice that then suddenly has been silenced and it's just, it's not about addressing everyone's feelings because that's impossible, but coming to the best compromise or having conversations so that everyone feels like that maybe even though it's not happening the way that they want it to, that they appreciate that that is what is either the common good for everyone.

Much time was given to talk about the details of living together, about what was working or not for different people. There were sporadic discussions on how people's living spaces within the Occupation should be managed. Actions were taken as a result of these discussions, such as the designation of rooms for sleeping and working. A number of working groups were formed that included the maintaining of food supplies, looking after funds and the media group. Some people maintained their roles in the working groups whilst others fluctuated between and moved in and out of working groups as they pleased. Many people donated food and money, thus the occupiers had to do very little shopping. An electric hob, kettles and heaters were donated. The Occupation maintained a ban on alcohol and drugs (apart from the last night): this was a decision that was policed, as demonstrated by expulsion by members of the Occupation of two people found to have taken drugs on site. This was seen generally as strongly positive by those we interviewed, as a challenge to the stereotypical view of students and young people more generally. They also did not want to give the external elites a reason to close the Occupation. Mike referred to a visit to another Occupation in which alcohol was allowed:

Mike: It was horrible, because they were just all drunk and arguing, and just, nothing got done. It didn't feel like a productive space at all.

Although a small number had already participated in an Occupation, some had only before participated in marches. Several Occupation members were part of

the Newcastle Free Education Network, and some were members of youth organisation Woodcraft Folk or other such groups (Newcastle Free Education Network is a group of students at Newcastle University who are fighting against fees, cuts and privatisation and Woodcraft Folk is a movement for children and young people (see <http://woodcraft.org.uk/>)). However, the experience of organising an Occupation in this dialogic manner was new to everyone we interviewed, even to those who had experienced the processes of discussion in other contexts such as Woodcraft Folk. Some of the ways of interacting and the means of decision-making observed in the Occupation had been practiced in previous groups such as Newcastle Free Education Network and Woodcraft Folk. However, the dialogic manner was one with which all our respondents expressed satisfaction. There was a theme of surprise and delight that dialogic living and the creation of a dialogically managed space could work in this way:

Jake: I never felt out of my depth, which I think was really, really important, because you felt like you were part of each decision that happened and you could easily... If you had an opinion on something you could say it.... Everything was discussed enough that you didn't feel like, ah, what am I doing here.

Students felt they were learning from the dialogic processes:

Jason: we were educating ourselves. We had like skills share, all that sort of stuff. Like it was a really positive experience I think like and, in that respect, it was an out and out success.

Actions were undertaken by Occupation members to both maintain care and to further some particular but diverse utopian values. It was also recognised by almost all to be a process that took time:

Andrea: But the way that we made our decisions was as a group so by sending two people to actually speak to him in person, or sending ten people to the Council, we couldn't make any decisions there because it was, we were going by group consensus so we could only go and listen to what they had to say and then report back...which is a very long and slow way of getting anything done.

A number of safeguards were implemented to guarantee a level of safety and care. This was demonstrated by a locked and guarded door into the Occupation that nevertheless was relatively lax in the identification of those allowed entry. Strangers were welcomed as long as it was estimated by the people in the Occupation that they meant well. One of the tensions was about the balance between security and this openness to visitors with the purpose of actively encouraging dialogue:

Dominic: it's not shutting ourselves in, it's creating a space for people to actively discuss their opinions on the cuts and the tuition fee rises. It's an active open space that they can come and discuss... as a statement towards the University saying we are here and we do have demands that need to be met. So it is a double thing, obviously the shut in is the we will not be moved approach... to the people who can make decisions, but at the same time it is an open door to those who can come in and discuss their opinions with us.

The ways that the students were observed by and were reported to us to engage with each other can be characterised as dialogic (Elwood and Mitchell, 2013). There was a strong relational dimension; a willingness to embrace different ideas and to co-construct alternative positions. There were also many tensions that were lived with that were recognised as part and parcel of the process. These included tension concerning the time it took to hear all views so to come to an agreement, and tension between an open Occupation, to enable dialogue with outsiders, and the security of the Occupation. Even if consensus did not always happen between individuals – since there were people with strong views – the process by which discussion took place over relatively long periods of time meant that there was an overall dialogic process that, we feel, resulted in the creation of an intentionally dialogic space within the Occupation. Indeed, this dialogic process was also present in the interactions with several external parties, even though they sought to put across particular views and demands to those parties. The dialogic process recognised the fluidity of attendance in the Occupation, with people coming and going, but that certain ways of living and decision making would nevertheless be maintained. The students seemed to operate under a definition of democracy in which 'all parties are receptive to the voices of others and the communication is not closed down by an expert or dominant voice providing the "last word"' (Barrow and

Todd, in Kennedy et al., 2011). This was not simply consensus but something far more complex. We now consider how the students used social media and the internet to enhance their intentional dialogism of the Newcastle Occupation.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INTERNET

The student activists involved in the Newcastle Occupation contributed to the creation of an intentionally dialogic space through their extensive engagement with different types of social media and their use of the internet. Within moments of taking Occupation of the Fine Art Lecture Theatre at Newcastle University the students had set up a blog (<http://ncluniocc.blogspot.co.uk/>), a Facebook page and were actively using Twitter, email and any other forms of electronic communication available to them. As Theocharis (2012: 2) confirms, 'students deployed an arsenal of electronic and multimedia tools from the first hours of the Occupation'. Theocharis (2012: 170) observed that 'during the 2010 student protests, young people made heavy use of Twitter, a Web 2.0 platform which is deemed to facilitate organisation and coordination of political action,' and did so in a way that mobilised them politically and was dynamic. Indeed, the Newcastle Occupation had 797 followers on Twitter, the fifth most of all of the Occupations (University College London at the top) (Theocharis, 2012). 'The Occupation network used the online realm as an informational space where students could formulate, develop and distribute the demands from their universities and the government without any external interference from the authorities or the mainstream media' (Theocharis, 2013a: 1478). Bethany noted that much earlier on the Occupation 'recognised, that obviously, the internet is our main tool'. As Albert and Rachel confirm, the use of the internet and social media is a key mechanism for student activists to communicate their message with a range of different interest groups:

Albert: Mainly through well social media obviously and Facebook for the local students and Twitter for other Occupations and stuff like that and the media team were very good at getting interviews with the Guardian and Times and BBC ITV news.

Rachel: throughout Facebook and the internet, that has been the important ways and also through like emailing and like erm... getting in contact with the press and saying, 'This is what we're doing today, come and

take photos of it cos it's going to be amazing' and taking our own photos and sending them to like organisations.

So, whilst the students still used traditional forms of activism such as the use of leaflets, contacting the media and participating in direct action, the use of social media and the internet was a highly significant component of their approach to creating an intentionally dialogic space that enabled them to enact their political strategy.

The Occupation blog included information about the Occupation that had been collectively discussed and debated within the intentionally dialogic space created by the students, as discussed above. The information presented included lists of the demands of the Occupation, names of those who support the Occupation, the agreed ground rules and requests for donations. These demands were altered and added to as the Occupation continued, but any changes were only made following extensive discussion amongst the Occupation.

With regards to their use of social media and the internet, the students extended the spatial limitations of their intentionally dialogic space to engage with other Occupations, to communicate their message to a wider public, and to generate ideas for advancing their cause:

Andrea: we used Twitter and Facebook and we had a blog, we had an email address just for the Occupation and we updated those sort of all of the time and because we were able to have wi-fi access and people brought their laptops in, everybody could be updating their Facebook and saying, 'Look, this is what we're doing now, this is what other Occupations are doing, this is the press reaction', we just sort of, it would just spread that as widely as we could.

As Andrea notes here, these different forms of communication are used widely amongst young people in her age group and so we see here a specifically youth-focused form of political activism and engagement.

The dialogism of the Occupation extended beyond the physical boundaries of the occupied building at Newcastle University. Through their use of social media, the Occupation members were able to raise the profile of their cause, communicate with

other Occupations and create support for their actions. Through this, others heard about the Occupation and joined in. For example, Stan attended a local college and said:

Stan: I can't actually remember but I heard about it and, I think possibly off Facebook actually, erm... and so I just printed a lot of posters and made posters for the college and stuck them round the college and talked to a lot of people about it.

The students also actively used their online presence immediately to share images or information about the different forms of direct action they participated in. Rather than rely on traditional methods of communication (which may take hours, days or longer) to be communicated, the Occupation was able to share images and reports about their actions swiftly through social media. Jason explains how quickly they were able to do this:

Jason: we could see like who was looking at the blog well not who exactly but the levels of people looking at the blog. So like we did an action in Kingsgate where everybody went and lied (sic) down on the floor and they all sellotaped their mouths and when we did that we had more hits on one day than we'd had for like the entire time we'd been there, it just went 'Phwoo' like which was awesome like so the internet like and the blog in particular was a really, really big way of doing it. I mean, I didn't really have much to do with minding the blog er... but it was really, really like, fundamental.

We have shown that 'this assessment illustrates how young people (including the students and tens of thousands of others who joined them in the demonstrations) combined various e-tactics for political mobilisation with intensive offline political engagement' (Theocharis, 2012: 185). Such forms of political engagement and youthful encounters with the political could usefully be considered not only by political geographers but by others interested in understanding more about young people's involvement in P/politics. We now consider the nature of the actions and their intentional dialogism.

NATURE OF ACTIONS

The nature of the actions in which the students engaged also shows how they created an intentionally dialogic space in which different actions were debated in detail and carefully planned. One of the first tasks that the Occupation members focused upon was to set up and agree on their 'demands'. In an intentionally dialogic way the students discussed, debated and rehearsed the different possible demands they could put to the University to challenge the proposed changes to tuition fees and austerity cuts in general. This process included liaising with other Occupations (often using social media) and bringing together the ideas of different members of the Occupation. Dominic explains how this process unfolded and how specific suggestions were discussed and debated:

Dominic: Yeah, brainstorming and discussion and still the thing with all this equal discussion, sometimes I mean, I'm quite opinionated and I'm often not the one in a standard group discussion who will change that opinion but when it comes down to a lot of the practicalities of things we've got to do like, who do we say what to when, or what do we do about such and such and such, often there'll be someone sitting somewhere who just has this sudden brainwave of a really practical thought that no-one's mentioned about it er... and everyone just storms ahead and it makes it a lot better and so I think through that sort of general process we came to the demands, you know, someone would say, 'Oh, we need to demand this' and then say 'Well, is that completely impractical because no-one will ever be able to do that', er... so, and so we formulated demands specifically to be achievable by the University but obviously not to be so ultimately achievable as to negate our presence whatsoever.

Only those who felt comfortable doing so engaged in direct action and students were able to opt out of specific actions without feeling guilty or being cajoled into participating. Some members of the Occupation were particularly keen on specific forms of direct action, whilst others were less so, and even when action was being undertaken some students would always stay at the Occupation space to keep it secure. For example, some students were keen to raise the profile of the Occupation

by staging a sit-in of the Council Chamber of Newcastle City Council. During a lengthy discussion, some students expressed strong opposition to this suggestion, arguing that it would be a misplaced use of the time and resources of the Occupation and was targeting the wrong audience. In the end, those who were supportive of this suggestion participated in a sit-in and ended up receiving support from the local Council:

Liam: some things like the Council Chamber Occupation was good because, although they were small scale, they made a direct kind of difference within like the councillors and people who have power, you know.

A useful example of the intentionally dialogic space created by the students was when they planned to create a human barrier across the Tyne Bridge in order to stop the traffic and raise the profile of their campaign. Following extensive discussion amongst the Occupation members, it was agreed that the students would operate in 'affinity groups' (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006) of four. If one person wanted to leave the barrier, the others in their affinity group would leave together so that no single person felt they were letting the group down or would feel uncomfortable about leaving.

Samantha explains here that she chose not to participate in this form of direct action yet remained a member of the Occupation, participated in other forms of direct action and contributed to various Occupation meetings:

Samantha: I felt erm... from what I could see it was getting no media attention and Nick Clegg or no-one wasn't seeing it and all I could see it doing was inconveniencing a lot of public transport users so I thought it was a bit pointless and I didn't go to the Tyne Bridge thing but when it was being discussed I imagined it would be a similar thing, minimal press coverage, minimal actual impact apart from to inconvenience some people who aren't the people implementing cuts so I don't think that was the best idea.

A key message that came through all of the interviews was about the overall aims of the Occupation and the sense in which this was misunderstood and misrepresented by the University and by the media. All members of the Occupation

held broad perspectives on politics and were not solely concerned with their own situation. Indeed, the changes in fees would not directly affect most of those involved in the Occupation as they were already in the higher education system and so would not be subject to the new fees regime. However, many students were angry and frustrated by the ways in which many politicians represented them as suddenly being engaged with politics because other students would have to pay high fees. As many Occupation members reminded us, whilst they resisted the changes in fees they were also members of the Occupation for a range of political reasons. They held strong opinions on a broad range of political issues about education, austerity and welfare (indeed, seven days after setting up their demands, the Occupation agreed to add to their demands a call for asylum-seeking students to be treated as 'home' students demonstrating the ways in which the students were engaged with a range of political and democratic issues). They also perceived government action on fees in terms of 'cutting support to the arts and humanities' (Andrea). This provides clear evidence of their broad engagement with a range of issues and was reflected in the dialogic nature of their actions.

The students expressed a wide range of emotions in addition to anger. There was excitement, pride and also nervousness in 'doing something for something that is right' (Hannah) and 'being part of something bigger' (Mike). Dominic commented that there was 'not a lot of escaping from reality' in the Occupation. There was a sense, we felt, that the self would shift through tensions in internal and external dialogue so the students might find themselves transformed by the process of the Occupation, as much as transforming what was around them.

A broad approach to 'education' was taken by the students and this was part of their political expression. Indeed, it was the alternative education conference that the students organised immediately after a march against fee increases that led to the decision to stage the Occupation. During the Occupation they organised 'alternative' lectures on topics in line with their themes and created an intentionally dialogic space where people with similar political persuasions could discuss and debate social and political issues together. Consider the views of Andrea and Albert:

Andrea: There were some, there was one that was sort of just a forum for all of the different sort of humanities lecturers to come together and to talk

between themselves and to us about how they were responding to the situation. And I don't feel they will get much of an opportunity to do that apart from passing in the corridor every now and then.

Albert: I thought they were really good and it was something you don't get to hear lecturers say what they want to say and teach what they want to teach because of constrictions by the University and yeah some of them were very very interesting.

Here we see that the students created an intentionally dialogic space not only for themselves but for others – such as university lecturers – to share their ideas about social and political issues. Finally, we now explore how the Occupation members engaged with the elite.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ELITE

During their time in the Occupation, students engaged with those who were involved in formal politics or held positions of political power (e.g. they invited into the Occupation the local MP, the University management, the University student welfare officers, the University security officers, the police, the media and lecturing staff). These interactions were necessary for the Occupation to continue to exist and for the actions to take place to try to fulfil the aims of the Occupation. Visits from authorities usually led to meetings outside the Occupation. The students had discussions with the police in order to arrange public marches. They also had visits from the University health and safety managers. However, there was a permeable boundary between these groups. Some authorities were given entry, for example where this was to inspect the safety of the living standards. University staff and researchers may also be considered an elite group, and many staff visited the Occupation to donate food, talk to the students and deliver alternative education lectures. Students welcomed this group. The academic staff members who visited the Occupation were generally highly supportive of the students.

What is interesting is the manner in which these interactions with the elite came about. The Occupation attempted to interact in different ways with the various elites such as the Vice Chancellor and senior University staff, the police and political parties. The more or less leaderless, non-hierarchical community created by the

practices of dialogism led to an intention for the whole Occupation to enter into debate with the University, which did not fit the hierarchical notions of leadership held by the University management. Nonetheless, dialogic practices were able to be implemented. Examples include the students' discussions and negotiations with the police over the route and timing of marches, and the meeting with the VC after the students had stormed a town hall meeting.

The two main groups with which the occupiers dealt were those they saw as able to satisfy the Occupation demands; the University authorities (mostly in the form of the Registrar's office), and those they needed to deal with to secure the Occupation, (in the form of the University security staff). In both cases the students maintained their non-hierarchical dialogic processes, but the relationships were of a very different nature in each.

The members of the Occupation were keen to talk to the University Vice Chancellor. The Vice Chancellor was prepared to talk to them, but only if they or their representatives came to meet him outside the Occupation. Being an illegal occupation of space, the Vice Chancellor was not prepared to meet the students inside. However, the students did not have a 'leader' who could represent them at such a discussion and the students were unable all to leave the Occupation together as it would then cease to be occupied. However, discussions between the students and the Registrar and Deputy Registrar enabled the students to present to the University their views and ways of operating. There were a number of tensions in interactions with the University management:

Beatrice: there was like one day when I think Scott Smith [member of University senior management], came in and took away a book that was allowing, like a Log In book, that was allowing non-Newcastle students in, but then, I think when we asked for it back, he gave it back, so far they've, so far, I think, they sort of feel like we're an irritant more than like a real disturbance so they know that term's going to end soon so...

Jake: at one point people were at the top of the stairs in the reception bit and they were trying to get rid of us and the security guard was at the top, and Scott Smith was up at the top as well, and one of the security guards was like, come on, let's go, da, da, da, and he pushed

someone, not in an aggressive way but just like come on, touching him. And Scott Smith immediately grabbed his arm, the security guard's arm, pulled him away and went don't touch them, and that was... Instantly I gained a lot of respect for Scott Smith because I saw his respect in us. And I think he understood how serious we were and we knew what we were doing, and I think that changed as we were with it. There's a few things that were strange that they did, like they came in once going, oh, we've had reports of illness.... This woman came in and we didn't know who it was.

The University has its own security staff who interacted frequently with the students. Security staff were posted outside the door used by students and visitors. Coming and going was allowed by the staff and they made no attempt to enter the Occupation. Indeed, over time a relationship developed between the students and security staff, many of whom were supportive of the Occupation. The students went out of their way to make friends with them, for example offering them cups of tea, but these were only accepted in the second week of the Occupation:

Samantha: we tried to take them a cup of tea every day erm... and they didn't accept it until about the second week... and then he went, 'Oh, go on then', and we all thought it was a breakthrough.

Dominic: The security has been fantastic. Organisationally, I mean, structurally and how they've responded to our physical presence here, they've been very good at leaving us be to do what we're up to and I like that. I mean, it gives us even more freedom to run this as a really useful space er... and that's really good as well.

Marjory: The security staff like, even like the Head of Security, said to us that he secretly supported what we doing.

There was deliberate policy not to let the Occupation and its actions be dominated by external political groups and parties. One student told us that another Occupation that he had visited contained a large group of people from the Socialist Workers Party and this had led to pre-meetings being held, a practice not encouraged by the Newcastle Occupation. To avoid this, all meetings encouraged the participation of

everyone, as described above. In other words, the students actively excluded particular forms and types of politics which provides useful clues about why young people may not participate in formal politics (Fahmy, 2003) to that extent that adults and older people do.

Samantha: guy from the SWP kept on putting his hand up and being like, like he was basically butting in... you know, as Chair, you know, using consensus, I could say, 'Look, wait your turn, it's not your turn to talk, other people have just as much right to talk here as you do'.

There was evidence in student dealings with different elite groups of sophisticated, differentiated political action. The interaction with these groups was characterised by an engagement with difference whilst maintaining a stance of negotiation and discussion and avoiding a movement away from a non-hierarchical structures. Once again, dialogism is not characterised by an easy consensus but by tension and difference.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the actions and perspectives of students involved in the Newcastle Occupation of 2010. We have argued that the students created an intentionally dialogic space in the Occupation and this is evident in the structure they adopted and the actions in which they participated, as well as how they engaged with elite and used social media and the internet to advance their cause. The complex ways in which people interacted to create the elements of the Occupation suggests deliberate action to bring about dialogism in people's dealings with each other (Wegerif, 2007). There was a strong relational dimension; a willingness to embrace different ideas and to co-construct alternatives. By way of conclusion, we offer three broader sets of observations that emerge from this paper.

First, it is clear that the students involved in the Newcastle Occupation were 'savvy' and strategic in terms of their knowledge of, and engagement with, politics. Despite this, those involved in other Occupations of university buildings across the country were persistently derided by the press, politicians and other elites with no recognition of the sophisticated ways in which the occupiers developed their movements and organised their approaches. We were particularly struck by the

disjuncture between what we witnessed in the Occupation and how this was represented in the press and spoken of by politicians. Contrary to the dominant discourse at the time, we agree with Henn and Foard (2012: 62) who note, 'as we have seen, young people do have an interest in politics, but specifically in a politics that respects their intelligence and represents their views; they want to be taken seriously'. By exploring the engagements of the students, we contribute to the ongoing development of political geographies of youth (Hörschmann, 2008a). In particular, this paper has integrated debates about student activism and protest (e.g. Theocharis, 2012) with discussions about both the everyday politics of youth and their engagements with formal politics (Fahmy, 2003; Kallio and Häkli, 2011). Following Hörschmann's (2008a) suggestion about adopting a broader view of political agency, we contend that this could be a useful way forward for political geographers interested in exploring the complex ways that young people are connected with, and enrolled in, political issues. We hope that this paper makes a contribution to political geographies by emphasising the contribution that young people are making to a political affairs and the need to recognise their unique contributions.

Second, rather than stigmatise the students or represent them as disengaged with the political system, we agree with Theocharis (2012: 188) who notes that 'political scientist and policy makers should pay particular attention to these forms of offline and online youth mobilisations, which steer clear of the demanding models of deliberative and discursive democracy.' We see this specifically in the ways in which the students used social media and the internet to advertise and promote their campaign. Far from being politically immature and innocent, the students shared ideas, practices and approaches with other Occupations, advertised their actions to others in order to generate support, and were able to challenge the decisions and values of those in power. Perhaps if more recognition was given to such diverse forms of political engagement then more people would start to see the ways in which many young people are both engaged and astute political agents, rather than distant and disengaged from political issues. Moreover, we have demonstrated the significance of continuing to explore the multiple spaces at which democracy and activism take place outside of formal political institutions and actors (Barnett and Low, 2004a). In particular, this paper has subtly explored the scaling of activism and

political engagement through the ways that the members of the Occupation employed a series of embodied, institutional, urban and national tactics to make their voices heard.

Third, we note more complex perspectives on consensus brought into being by how the students engaged in politics. It was not about a convergence of viewpoints; dialogism implies tensions and the provisionality evident in all aspects of the Occupation from arranging the living space to negotiating actions. Provisionality was implicit in the openness to otherness that we observed, characterising dialogism: any decision always needed to be made provisionally. This paper therefore contributes to debate on the 'dialogical subject(s) of citizenship' (Werbner and Yuval-Davis, 1999: 10) and the recognition that activism is dialogical and relational. The intended dialogic space may be one example of Mouffe's (2000) agonistic pluralism in that the erasure of difference was defended and multiple identities expressed. We argue that this was maintained at the same time as a form of consensus. We also suggest that Beaumont and Nicholls' (2008) search for tools useful for deepening democratic engagement might draw upon our analysis in the occupation of a dialogically managed space.

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